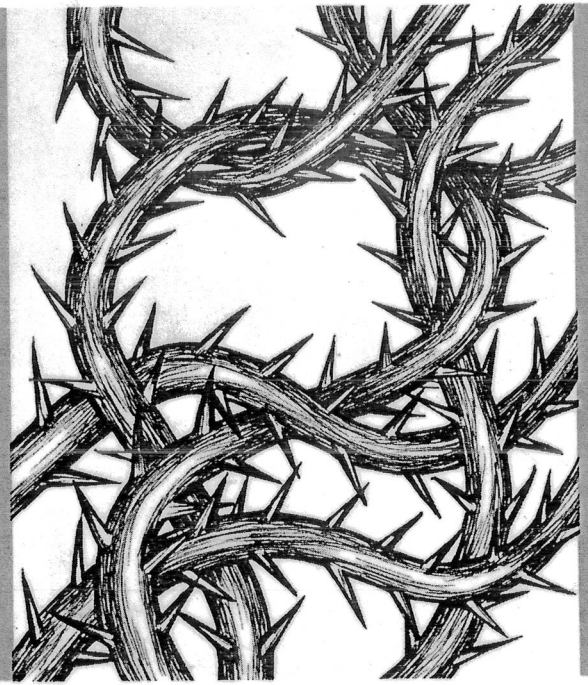
SAHAR KHALIFEH



WILD THORNS

Wild Thorns

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Translated by Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea

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The mountain road was steep, and the scent from the arched pines overwhelmed him, reminding him of what to expect beyond the bridge. The pine forests of Jirzim, of al-Tur, of Ramallah. Pine trees, prickly pears, almonds, grapes, figs, olives. Mount Sinai and that 'peaceful land' that had never known peace. No; perhaps it had, once. A land of milk and honey, the 'promised land'.

He remembered something he had once seen painted on the side of a red truck in Jerusalem, a few months after the occupation began. It was a strange picture of two men carrying a bunch of grapes that hung like a slaughtered sheep from a bare branch. And the bunch had indeed been drawn as big as a sheep, each single grape the size of a light bulb. 'Come buy my grapes, as big as light bulbs! Come buy my cucumbers, tender as a baby's fingers!' Yes, a land of milk and honey, truly the promised land.

The taxi drove on beneath the scented green foliage, which stretched as far as the eye could see. The voice on the radio sounded faint, as if coming from the bottom of a deep valley: 'Those sad northern nights!'

Why do these sad songs hurt us so much? Is it because we are a romantic people? He'd never been romantic himself. At least he wasn't any longer, or so he believed. How had he come to that conclusion? Training. Bullets. Crawling on all fours. Pulling in your stomach. Such things make you unromantic in thought and deed. Personal dreams

evaporate, the individual becomes a single shot in a fusillade. You can be honed by experience to become a rocket, a guided missile.

That was the logic of it all. They'd said many things and so had we; logical things, historical equations imposed on the individual, making him a single number in the equation. A number. One among others. Thus the equation takes form scientifically, rationally, tangibly. Thus romanticism fades and dreams die. Yes, and poetry dies, along with passion. Everything becomes a link in the chain of the 'cause' itself. But . . .

'Sad northern nights . . .'

The words still sliced into him, into his sensitive, lonely soul.

The car ran smoothly on down the asphalt slopes. The breeze toyed with the driver's *kufiyya*,* making it billow out behind him like a sail. He put up his hand to secure his scarf, then fiddled with the knob on the radio: 'Voice of the Arabs' from Cairo, 'Middle East Broadcast', 'This is London', 'Voice of the Palestine Liberation Organization', 'Israel Broadcasting Service from Jerusalem'. 'Friends, good people of Egypt . . .' The driver spat out an obscenity and glared back at the passengers, at Usama in the rear-view mirror. 'God help you all, how can you bear to look at them?' he demanded. 'They even speak Arabic, the bastards, like they were born to it.'

'They *were* born to it.'

Silence returned. Through the windows he could see the sun's rays spreading over the dark mountainsides, like stretch marks left on women's bellies after they've given birth. The trails twisted and turned, snake-like, as the car sped on down. The fragrant spring breeze carried the mist rising from the lush velvet of the Jordan Valley to the land beyond the river.

* *Kufiyya:* the large square headscarf worn by men in Palestine and many other parts of the Middle East; frequently with red and white or black and white check patterns.

A pot-bellied man with protruding veins in his neck sitting next to Usama held out his hand, displaying an expensive-looking watch.

'Look,' he said, 'I brought this from Kuwait. My sons live like kings out there. Money, prestige, the latest cars. May God continue to bless them! This watch is a present for my son Khalid from his older brother Muhammad. By the way, my name's Abu* Muhammad.'

'Pleased to meet you, Abu Muhammad.'

'Yes, Muhammad's been working in Kuwait ever since the 1948 exodus; then, after '67, Salih followed him, leaving only Zaynab, Hafsa, Hadiyya and Khalid in Jenin. Yes, Khalid's the last of the line. And of the six he's the only one who's been a problem. He got out of prison on bail. They'd tortured him in every part of his body, even down there. They loosed a dog on him that went for his genitals. He may be infertile.'

'You mean impotent.'

'OK, impotent, sterile, it's all the same thing . . . Don't make fun of me. I'm no college man, as you can see.'

'You're fine just as you are, Abu Muhammad.'

'Nice of you to say so. His brothers have really made it; they're men of wealth and position. Khalid's the only no-good drop-out. He helps me in the shop. I try to get some use out of him, but he's a frivolous kid, always disappearing. Every evening before sunset I have to scour the town for him and sometimes I find him, sometimes I don't. He hasn't learned anything, the bastard. You can still see the marks of torture on his body, but he still hasn't learned his lesson. What I'm most afraid of is that he'll do something stupid and then they'll blow up our house.'

The driver sounded his horn in warning and Abu Muhammad regained his self-control and stopped talking. Hiding the watch in the pocket of his loose overcoat, he looked furtively at the other passengers. But no one spoke

* *Abu*: literally 'father of'. Male individuals are often known by the name of their oldest son, prefixed by 'Abu', as here, Abu Muhammad.

until the vegetable farms of the Jordan Valley came into view.

'Do you think they'll make me pay customs duty on the watch?' Abu Muhammad asked.

'Wear it yourself,' said Usama.

'Good idea; but what do I do with the lengths of cloth? Will they charge duty on them too?'

No one answered. They were all wondering what would happen at the bridge. Searches, checks, customs, perhaps even lengthy interrogations, if deemed necessary. Electronic search equipment beeping constantly, and then having to take off your clothes in wooden cubicles, having your shoes and luggage scanned by X-ray machines . . .

Abu Muhammad sighed deeply and muttered some verses from the Koran, calling for patience in times of adversity. Then, turning to his fellow-passenger, he asked, 'What do you do?'

'Nothing.'

'How do you manage?'

'From the sweat I spilt in the oil states. But I didn't make it out there.'

'Success comes from God alone, my son. So, you're like Khalid then.'

Yes, I'm just like Khalid — no money and no prestige. I might well cause a house — or houses — to be blown up, even buses and offices. I'm like Khalid all right, or maybe he's like me. My mother's waiting for me on the other side, ready to stuff me with her cooking as soon as I cross the threshold. I can smell it all already. The steam from the cooking pans, the jasmine in a flower pot; I can see the prayer mat and the beads; I can hear her saying her early morning prayers, before dawn, with the stars still out.

His thoughts carried him over the bridge to the beautiful stretches of the Jordan Valley: al-Fari'a, the green Badan Valley, the little waterfall where people kept bottles of soft drinks cool, the bags of almonds piled up in front of the waterfall, beneath the great walnut trees.

Yes, when will those tender feelings die in me? I've had them all my life! This constant longing for the unknown, this feeling of melancholy that overwhelms me whenever I hear a song or smell a flower, and the sense of elation I feel at sunset. My love and yearning for the very earth of this green land of mine, so blessed and so filled with goodness.

A romantic, right? No way! Not since the training, the shooting, the crawling on all fours; such things make a man unromantic in thought and deed. That's the logic of it. That's the equation.

'Halt!'

The order came from a soldier sitting in front of the wooden walkway. Usama stopped, his heart pounding.

'Open your suitcase!'

The Israeli stretched out his hand and rifled the contents.

'What's this?'

'Librium.'

'Yeah, you people are crazy about that stuff.'

The man's comment annoyed and depressed him. A buzzer on the electronic surveillance equipment sounded and Usama's muscles tensed in an involuntary reflex of self-defence.

'Stand here!' 'Sit over there!' 'Wait in front of the window marked "family reunion programme" for Arabs joining their families.' 'Who put you down for the programme? Your mother? Fine. Come over here. Come inside. Take off your clothes. Strip, strip. Yes, everything. Shoes too.'

A metal prod inserted in the sole of a shoe cracked it open. Usama's eyes widened and his breathing quickened but he checked his anger.

'What's that notebook? Hand it over, let's see if it's really empty. Acid will tell us.'

'Sit down over there on that bench.'

'Usama al-Karmi! Usama al-Karmi! Who's Usama al-Karmi?'

'I am.'

'You are, huh? Why didn't you answer? You were in the toilet? How was it, filthy dirty as usual? Dirty Arabs! We build spotless sweet-smelling toilets and you fill them with shit!'

'Shit here, there and everywhere! You, madam, give me that chain, don't hide it down your bra. Gold isn't allowed. You, sir, what's this? A watch? Who for? Your mother? Will she help pay the duty? Off to customs. And what's this? Material for your mother? Lucky woman, isn't she, with access to all the gold of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait! You all go off to the oil wells and then come back here. What for? What is it you like so much here? You don't know when you're well off. But we do. In a few years we'll be down there and you'll need a permit to visit the Kaaba in Mecca!'

'Boiled sweets and chocolate, forbidden! Honey, forbidden! Absolutely forbidden! It's the law, *Adon*.* Arabs know the law! Over there for interrogation.'

Suddenly, as he made his way along the walkway, a girl screamed. Passing beneath a small window, he heard the short, sharp slaps of a hand on flesh. His hair stood on end and he stopped in his tracks. The girl cried out, 'Swine! You swine! You swine! Aah!'

A short soldier with a black moustache and a bushy beard came toward him carrying a rifle topped with a gleaming bayonet. He smiled politely, and said, in an accent betraying his Iraqi origins, 'Move along, friend, don't be afraid. It's your turn over there.'

Glancing at the little window, the man continued, 'A real dish, but a whore. We found a coded message under her wig. Off you go now, don't be afraid.'

The beating went on, the violent slaps clearly audible through the small window. Usama found himself in such a turmoil of pain and nervous energy that for a moment he lost all sense of where he was. Then suddenly the scream-

* *Adon*: the Hebrew equivalent of 'Mr'.

ing stopped and he stood there, listening intently for what would happen next. The soldier shouted angrily at him, all politeness gone, 'Get going! In over there, now!'

He walked forwards feeling weak at the knees, his stomach churning with fear. From his accent, the soldier seemed Polish. He had a blonde moustache, was heavily built and stood almost as tall as the wooden shed itself. A bulldozer could be heard outside, its noise filling the shed. The Pole yelled above the din of the bulldozer, 'What's your name?'

'Usama al-Karmi.'

'Age?'

'Twenty-seven.'

'Where are you coming from?'

'Amman.'

'Where were you before that?'

'In an oil country.'

'Doing what?'

'Working.'

'What kind of work?'

'Translator.'

'Oh, so that's why your English is so good.'

'. . .'

'What's that? Speak up.'

'Nothing.'

'What did you translate?'

'Company documents and correspondence.'

'Who did you work for, a company, radio station or a government?'

'A company.'

'What did you translate?'

'Insurance policies.'

'Oh. This your notebook?'

'Yes.'

'Whose name is this? And whose address?'

'It's the name and address of the shop where my mother buys her vegetables.'

'What's the grocer's name?'

'It's right there in front of you.'

'Haj Abdullah Mubarak, Good Faith Grocery, Saada Street. Why are you carrying this address?'

'So he can direct me to my mother's house.'

'You don't know your mother's address?'

'No.'

'You don't know where your mother lives?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I just don't.'

'How come?'

'I left home to work abroad five years ago, three months after the occupation started. We were living in Tulkarm; then my father died and my mother moved to Nablus.'

'Why did your mother move to Shekem?'*

'She likes Nablus.'

'Why does she like Shekem?'

'She's got lots of relatives in Nablus.'

'And why have you left the oil countries to return to Shekem?'

'I'm returning to Nablus because my father died.'

'Who died?'

'My father.'

'When did he die? Speak up!'

'Two years ago.'

'Why are you coming back now and not two years ago? Speak up!'

'I was waiting for permission from the family reunion programme.'

The noise from the bulldozer stopped and the Pole relaxed visibly. He stood behind his small desk, a glass of orange juice in his hand. 'And what are you going to do in Shekem?' he asked.

'I'm going to look for a job in Nablus.'

* *Shekem*: the Hebrew name by which some Israelis refer to Nablus.

The shouting and screaming broke out again. The Arab girl was sobbing while a female Israeli soldier yelled, 'Open your legs! Open your legs! I've got to see up there! Open your legs!'

There came the sound of slaps: 'You swine! You swine! Oh! Oh!'

The Pole frowned and wiped his blonde moustache. He started again: 'And what have you been doing since you left?'

Usama kept himself under control and answered wearily, 'I was working for an insurance company. Here are my papers.'

'Where've you travelled over the past five years? To Algeria?'

'Yes.'

'Why Algeria?'

'You charge customs duty on Algeria too?'

'What was that?'

'Nothing.'

'What did you do in Algeria?'

'Nothing.'

'All the way to Algeria for nothing?'

'I just went to see it.'

'What else did you do?'

'Nothing.'

The two men stared hard at each other.

'Where else did you go? Syria?'

'Yes.'

'For how long?'

'Three months.'

'What did you do there?'

'I began work on my Master's degree.'

'Why didn't you finish it?'

'I will later.'

'Hmm. You say you were a translator?'

'Yes.'

'How did you manage to get three months' leave?'

'They fired me.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know!'

The bulldozer started up again.

'Speak up! Why were you fired?'

Usama's head was throbbing, he could feel the blood pressure rising like a hammer beating on his brain.

'Why were you fired?'

'Because I'm Palestinian, Palestinian,' he shouted angrily.

'Give me another reason.'

'That was the only charge.'

'Didn't they fire you for going to Syria for three months?'

'No, I went to Syria after they fired me.'

'But you also went there before they fired you.'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'A couple of years ago.'

'Why did you go then?'

'To see my mother.'

'But you said your father died two years ago.'

'She came to Syria to see me after he died.'

'So you were in Syria, then?'

'No, I was in the oil countries. She sent me a telegram, so I went to see her.'

'Why Syria?'

'To stay at my uncle's.'

'What does he do?'

'He's got a sweets factory there.'

'Your mother's Syrian?'

'No, Palestinian. My uncle too. And me as well.'

'Why Syria in particular?'

'When my uncle left Jaffa he settled in Syria.'

'Hmm . . . How long were you in Syria?'

'Two months.'

'What about your job?'

'I took leave.'
'For two months?'
'I'd already been working there for two years.'
'What did you do for two months?'
'I comforted my mother and asked her to apply for the family reunion programme for me.'
'Why did you ask her to apply?'
'. . .'
'Why did you ask her to apply for your re-entry? Didn't you like the oil countries?'
'No.'
'Nor the oil princes?'
'No.'
'Who do you like then? Arafat? Habash?'
'. . .'
'Who do you like?'
'Moshe Dayan!'
A smile of derision.
'So you like Moshe Dayan. Why's that?'
'He's a man of war.'
'So you like war then?'
'Don't you?'
'I'll ask the questions! So you spent six months in Syria?'
'Five.'
'Who did you see there?'
'Lots of people.'
Usama smiled wearily, and saw a look of warning in the other man's blue eyes.
The girl began to shout again, her screams mingling with the din of the bulldozer and the shouts of the Israeli woman soldier. Usama walked along quickly, as instructed, feeling as though someone were chasing him with a stick. Then he regained his self-control and slowed down. Afraid? No, I'm not afraid. Then why did I walk so quickly? A simple reflex, nothing more.
He sat down on the long wooden bench and took stock of his surroundings. He was in a large shed. All around him

people were sitting in long rows on similar benches. Each carried a number. Soldiers stood at tables piled high with the travellers' clothing and other belongings.
'Usama al-Karmi! Who's Usama al-Karmi? Come and wait over here. Mizrahi will question you.'
'Where've you been?'
'In Amman.'
'Before Amman?'
'In the oil countries.'
'What did you do there?'
'I worked for an insurance company. My father's dead. My uncle's Palestinian and my mother's Palestinian. Me too. I was fired for no reason. They deported a hundred and sixty Palestinians on the same night. They dragged me out of bed. I put a jacket over my pyjamas and they put me on the first plane to Lisbon; from there I took a plane to Beirut, and then went to Damascus. I stayed there for three months and started working on my Master's degree. Isn't that allowed?'
'Sit over here and wait for Captain Moshe.'
'How many times am I supposed to repeat this story? Yes, this is the address of the grocer. Yes, his name is Haj Abdullah Mubarak, Good Faith Grocery, Saada Street. I'm my mother's only child; any crime in that?' You're through with me? Your minds at ease about me? Good! I'll put your minds to rest in a way you can't even imagine!
'This is my permit to go through customs? Which way do I go?'
He stood in a long line in front of the cashier's window. Ahead of him, a fat woman with a thin black veil stood weeping and wailing. 'Ten dinars! That's not fair! Don't you fear God?'
The soldier raised his head from his ledger and waved a piece of paper at her through the bars of the cashier's window. 'Borrow it!' he said.
'Who from? I don't know anyone here.'
She started crying again and clapped her hands together

in distress as though the world was coming to an end.

'Find a way to pay it!' the soldier said coldly.

'That's not fair, Effendi!' she sobbed.

Effendi? 'Effendi!' she called him! Usama almost reached out to slap the woman's black-swathed head. How can you use that word? Why the tears, woman? Ten dinars aren't worth a single tear at their customs counter. Save your tears for catastrophe and defeat! Save them for what's going to keep on happening as long as there are people like you around!

'Be fair, Effendi!'

'It's not a question of fair or unfair. Just hand over the ten dinars and take your things.'

'But it's only some underwear and children's pyjamas. The whole lot's not worth ten dinars.'

'Ten dinars it is.'

'Okay, just take the things, then, and let me go.'

'No way; not until you pay up. Borrow the money.'

'Please Effendi, take five dinars. That's all I have. Then let me go.'

'No, ten. Come on madam, let's get this over with.'

Two Arab men intervened.

'Please, Effendi,' they begged, 'let her take her things. Generosity's a virtue, they say.'

Generosity a virtue, indeed! 'Effendi'! How can you talk like that? What a people! What a people we are!

The girl's voice rose again from the strip-search cubicle, sounding weak now, hoarse and distant, but still audible: 'You swine . . .'

Abu Muhammad whispered in his ear, 'They'll want duty for the watch all right, and for the cloth too. If I'd known, I wouldn't have brought any presents at all. They rob us blind, the bastards. They suck our blood and make our lives hell so we'll emigrate.'

'To think I waited two long years to rejoin my family,' said Usama, 'looking forward to this day as though it were my wedding night.'

'But life inside the occupied territories is unbearable.'

'And I looked forward to it so much!'

'You do remind me of Khalid,' said Abu Muhammad. 'Yes, of all my six, only Khalid's given me any trouble.'

'Hand it over then. Hand it over. Here, ten dinars, twenty, fifty. Come on, please, just let us get on with our job. You, little bride, you'll have to pay fifty. Madam, please don't call me "Effendi". My name's Baruch. Just call me Baruch, without the title. Ten dinars will do you more good than ten "Effendis". Now you, sir, five please.'

A taxi driver took his suitcase, threw it into the boot of a black seven-seater Mercedes and returned to his seat in the shade to wait for the car to fill up with other passengers.

For the first time in five years Usama was returning to the West Bank. The reunion was already quite different from what he'd imagined, quite different from the flights of fancy in which he'd indulged. He felt that the West Bank had now been reduced to the size of a genie's magic bottle. He felt that everything had evaporated: his yearnings and feverish images during five long, barren years of deprivation; the dreams that took him to the bridge every night, and to the land that lay beyond it, to those idyllic green meadows, the clear waterfall tumbling over the bottles of soft drinks in the green valley, the bags of almonds piled up in front of the waterfall, beneath the towering walnut trees. Only hallucinations filled his mind now, and words that droned on with endless monotony . . . oil, Syria, Master's degree, my father's dead, the family reunion programme, Good Faith Grocery, Lisbon, generosity's a virtue, you swine, you swine, you swine.

As he got into the taxi, he glanced around him at the landscape. Yes, heaven was here beneath his feet and before his eyes. But he was now a prisoner in the genie's bottle.

The land around the barracks set up to process entry into the occupied West Bank was grey, devoid of even the smallest shrub. Skilled hands had removed all the natural ground cover of spring to prevent anything undesirable from slipping across the border, to keep out anyone bent on challenging state security. New shoots of mallow had been recently uprooted and their green leaves lay piled on the pavement in front of the barracks, casting soft shadows on the dusty, barren ground.

A soldier emerged from a small wooden sentry-box, surrounded by barbed wire. He yawned, screwed up his eyes with their short, reddish lashes, and held out a hairy freckled arm for the driver's pass.

Having successfully negotiated the check-point, the taxi drove slowly at first and then gathered speed. The wind, rushing in through the front vent, made an irritating whistling noise, but the passengers seemed oblivious to it, silent, lost in their thoughts. Abu Muhammad held out a packet of Kent cigarettes: 'Please take one.'

'Thanks, but no. I don't smoke imperialist cigarettes.'

'But these are Kent. Take one, why not? They're worth it. They took my two cartons, the bastards, leaving me this one packet; they broke open seventeen of the twenty cigarettes inside, thinking they might be stuffed with something other than tobacco. Please. Take one. One for me, one for you and one for Khalid.'

'Khalid smokes American cigarettes?' Usama asked in amazement.

'Israeli ones too. Go on, have one. A packet of Aliya costs 23 qurush now; it used to be 12.'

The driver, listening to the conversation as all drivers do, now volunteered a comment: 'You know what it costs the company to make a pack? Six qurush, friend. The rest is "protective tariff". We pay it and they buy weapons to protect us with. Isn't that something!'

Abu Muhammad nodded in agreement. 'Yes,' he said. 'I smoke El Al now.'

'Israeli cigarettes?' Usama asked, scandalized.

'And I eat Israeli rice, Israeli tahina and Israeli sugar. Commodities lose their nationality as soon as they reach Eliat. And we pay double taxes on everything, first to the nation of origin, then to the new one.'

'And you pay?'

'We pay for what we want and for what we don't want too,' commented the driver, slapping his steering wheel angrily.

Usama glared into the rear-view mirror, staring furiously into the driver's dull eyes. What had happened to these people? Was this what the occupation had done to them? Where was their will to resist, their steadfastness? His disgust erupted into an angry question: 'Where's the resistance then?'

The driver burst out laughing: 'With those who are paid for it.' He then went on to tell a stupid joke: 'I saw a kid once, standing on a wooden crate, smoking a cigarette and chanting:

I resist, I stand firm,
On my crate of lemons!'

The driver burst out laughing. One of the passengers in the front seat exploded angrily and launched into a speech passionate enough to move government leaders at one of

those conferences that are always being held in Arab capitals. He mouthed the standard clichés, exciting no one but himself, varying the tone of his voice to achieve the greatest emotional impact. He spoke of Arab unity, of how the Arab world stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf. He held forth on the 'tide of revolution', on the Third World nations, on Vietnam . . . oh, how he talked of Vietnam! Then there was a reference to the Algerian war of liberation, the 'war of a million martyrs' as it's called, and to the People's Republic of China, the Opium War, even of the war against house flies. Panting, he concluded, 'And there you sit, like lazy hangers-on, smoking your El-Als and inventing all sorts of justifications for it.'

No one spoke. The driver was smiling; he'd been enjoying watching the man's changing facial expressions. Abu Muhammad sat nodding left and right, his heavy jowls hanging down. The furious passenger spoke again: 'You don't answer! You don't so much as move! All you do is ensure the perpetuation of the species. But it's a species that doesn't deserve to be preserved. You don't think of the future. You're so short-sighted.'

This last phrase stuck in Usama's mind. Yes, the words spoken from the podium by the great leader stirred in his memory: 'The Palestinian organizations are afflicted with short-sightedness.' At the time he'd told himself that it wasn't the Palestinian organizations' fault, but the people inside Israel. Yes, he repeated to himself, it's the Arabs inside who are really to blame.

A woman in the back seat now spoke.

'So! Our friend here's quite an intellectual! Well done!'

The word 'intellectual' clearly annoyed the eloquent passenger, as did the cold sarcasm in her voice. He turned and stared at her, a woman in her forties. Her voice was firm and her gaze steady. She wore a plaster cast on her left forearm.

'You remembered everything perfectly,' she commented, 'except one other thing that someone said.'

'What's that?' he challenged her.

' "Wage real war and we shall be prepared for any sacrifice." '

'We should wage open war? What do you mean "we": Who are we? We're you. And if *you* don't support us, then . . .'

She leaned forward, raised her hand and quickly placed it over his mouth, shaking her head slowly and looking steadily into his eyes: 'Calm down,' she said quietly, looking pointedly at all the other passengers. 'Don't get so excited, my boy. Calm down.'

Usama too tried to calm his thoughts, but failed. That girl's screams still rang in his ears and in every cell of his body . . . 'You swine! You swine!'

'Didn't you hear that girl back there screaming at them?' Usama asked.

'Calm down! Just calm down!'

Usama turned away and stared out of the window. How can you calm down when you're so upset? Anger seemed to boil up everywhere on earth, yet this land they were driving through, his land, was dying from frost. The land itself, the occupation, was a crime we ourselves perpetrated, he thought, and the people's strength is only a myth. We swallowed the rhetoric and believed it was a cause, a revolution. But one hand can't clap on its own, as they say, and I'm alone. I'm alone.

A black-veiled woman implores a soldier's pity for ten dinars, while grown men cackle like hens 'generosity's a virtue, Effendi.' Abu Muhammad sits there smoking his cigarettes from the colonialists, from the occupiers, and bemoans the resistance activities of his youngest son, Khalid. Khalid's one, and I'm one. Each claps alone. An impossibility, while seventy thousand Arab hands are clapping inside Israeli factories! What a people!

The woman spoke again, her tone conciliatory: 'You two young gentlemen must be visitors, not residents.'

Usama, struggling to regain his self-control, replied, 'No, I'm a resident now too. My mother's arranged my re-entry.'

Abu Muhammad and the driver began to talk about the soaring cost of fuel.

Usama clenched his fist and struck his thigh. Turning to the woman, he whispered, his teeth clenched, 'Can't they think of anything except everyday trivialities? Ever since I boarded the taxi in Amman, all I've heard is the panting of the sick.'

'But you also heard a girl screaming.'

'Yes, she was shouting "swine",' he replied sadly, shaking his head. 'And I don't know who she was talking to. Anyhow, you can't clap with one hand.'

Her voice level and devoid of emotion, she asked him, 'Do you see how barren the land is now?'

He looked out of the window. Barren it certainly was.

'There used to be lemon groves here, all the way to the mountains. They burned them.'

'Burned them?'

'They were trying to erase the prints.'

'Prints?'

'Footprints. The trees were on the move. You remember the story of Zarqa al-Yamama,* who said she saw trees approaching with the enemy hiding behind them?'

What nonsense was this woman chattering about? Moving trees? Zarqa al-Yamama . . . Oh! Yes! I get it!

'Well, what about it?'

'The trees don't walk any more, but the prints are still there. Believe it or not, the earth is not really barren and dead. But keep your mouth shut and leave some tracks wherever you go.'

Usama said nothing for the rest of the journey. But when

* Zarqa al-Yamama: the legendary Arab Cassandra, who warned the people of her tribe that a hostile forest was advancing against them and was not believed. The forest turned out to be camouflage carried by a hostile tribe, who defeated the fighters of Zarqa al-Yamama's tribe. Her eyes were later put out by her chief.

the taxi stopped and the passengers spilled out onto the pavement in the main square of the commercial centre of town, he looked for the woman to say goodbye. She'd disappeared. A few days later, he saw her among the crowds in the old part of town. Her left forearm was no longer in a plaster cast.

Nothing in the town seemed to have changed. The square looked the same as always; the hands of the clock still moved on slowly and silently, marking the passage of time. Only the trees and plants had grown taller. The soap factory was still there; a damp smell of crushed olive pulp still seeped from behind its huge door. In the main office of the factory the big men of the town still sat talking, but doing nothing. Everybody was out on the pavement, doing things but not talking. Yes, nothing had changed.

There was a pervasive aroma of roasting coffee; great metal trays of *kinafa** were offered for sale on the pavement; the chimneys of the soap factory still belched forth black clouds above the ancient roofs.

An ear-splitting noise came from the radio and television shop. Farid al-Atrash† still moaned his lament: 'You have returned, oh day of my birth, you are back, oh day of pain.' No indeed; nothing had changed.

And yet. The people no longer seemed so poverty-stricken. They dressed fashionably now. And their pace was quicker. They bought things without haggling. There seemed to be a lot of money about. There were more sources of employment and wages had gone up. Prices had

* *Kinafa*: a sweet made of shredded pastry and unsalted cheese.

† Farid al-Atrash: a famous singer of Syrian origin very popular in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East.

risen, but people were eating meat, vegetables and fruit voraciously, as though they were starved, stuffing their children. Those who once had not owned so much as a sweater now swaggered about in leather jackets. Those who had not even possessed a scarf now muffled their ears in fur collars. Men's sideburns were longer. And skirts were shorter. Girls who had once been servants now worked in factories and offices. They were plumper, too. Something had changed.

But occupation is still occupation. Dignity excised was still lost. And yet something was different. The servant girls were servants no more, and the class ladder was less steep. Everyone seemed well fed.

Israeli-made goods were stacked in front of the shops, in the showroom windows, even on the pavements. Workers bought things greedily, ate well, dressed well. They stuffed their children.

'Who's this? Not Usama! Come and give me a hug, cousin. I'm so glad to see you safely back.'

Usama threw his arms around his cousin Adil and wept silently.

'What's happened to the country?' he cried. 'What's become of everyone? What's happened to make you so different? What's going on? Even little kids smoke in the streets! I see ads for porno films all over the place, while people stuff themselves with *kinafa* and smile. You're smiling too, Adil. What's become of you all, of the country? They've stuffed you full and made you greedy. They've absorbed you. And I see no sign of shame in your eyes.'

Adil drew a hand across his brow. 'Ah, Usama, I said the same thing when I first arrived from Amman. Don't be so surprised.'

They stood there motionless, silent. A big handcart piled full of boxes and bags of foodstuffs passed between them, separating them momentarily. Still not speaking, they crossed the main boulevard. The street peddlers cried out their wares: 'Fish from Gaza!' 'Oranges from Jaffa!'

'Bananas from Jericho!' The seller of liquorice and carob drinks clashed his cymbals rhythmically. The same old newspaper man shouted: *'Al-Quds! Al-Shaab! Al-Fajr!* Kissinger announces a solution to the crisis!' From the television shop, Farid al-Atrash continued his lament; the juice seller's cymbals clashed rhythmically; people went about their daily business, buying bread, vegetables and fruit.

As they turned off into a narrow street leading to the old part of town, a stench of damp and rot, garbage and decay, assaulted Usama's nostrils. Rotting fruit and vegetables were strewn at the base of the walls and a rusty barrel of fish stood in the middle of the pavement. The cobblestones were littered with muddy bits of paper.

'You *have* changed. Everything's different. Your streets are full of filth.'

'*Our* streets?'

'Ours, yours; the important thing is that you've changed. Is this an occupation or a disintegration?'

The tall man did not reply. He smiled stoically, then looked glum again. Usama pursued him with questions:

'What are you doing now, Adil?'

'I bow my head before life.'

'You bow your head?'

'Yes, and listen to the radio, read the papers, and feed nine mouths and one machine.'

'You mean your father's kidney machine?'

'Yes, and the real one too.'

'Come on, stop beating about the bush. What are you doing about the situation here? What have you done over there, on the inside?'

Adil said nothing.

Usama insisted: 'What are young people like you doing to oppose what goes on inside?'

'The same as what you've done to oppose what's outside.'

Usama stopped and stood staring at his cousin's sun-

burnt face. Their astonished eyes no longer met.

'You don't mean . . .?'

'And you? You don't mean . . .?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Well, I mean what I said too,' answered Adil.

Usama shook his head in despair. 'Yes, "short-sighted", all right. You're the ones to blame. You're the ones who hold the key to the situation.'

'Say "we", why don't you!'

'Nevertheless!'

'Nevertheless?'

In exasperation, Usama said, 'The picture's perfectly clear, can't you see that?'

Flicking the flies away from his face, Adil replied, 'There's more than one dimension to the picture.'

They walked on together, each contemplating his own dimension, and his own sorrows.

'Mother!'

He flung himself into her welcoming arms. A stream of kisses followed, prayers, cries of welcome, news, questions about health, about what there was to eat.

'It's time you got married, Usama, and there are pretty girls all over town. Your cousin Nuwar's become a lovely young woman. She's tall, and she has beautiful hair. She's at al-Najah College and there's always a stream of young men following her from home to college every day, and you can imagine how angry that makes your uncle Abu Adil. You know what he's like. And he's right, too. He's worried about the family honour.'

'How is my uncle?'

'From bad to worse, I'm afraid, son.'

'And Adil?'

'He bears everybody's burdens. And he's always asking about you.'

'I saw him in the main square. We hugged each other and I cried.'

'You cried? Usama, you didn't even cry when your father died! You cried in front of everyone? What will people say?'

'I was crying for our people, Mother, for our country.'

'The country's just fine, son. Things are all right. They'll get better soon; God will settle everything.'

'At least don't say that Kissinger will settle everything, Mother.'

'Singer? You mean there are still imported sewing machines in the country? Come on, Usama, today all the sewing machines are Israeli-made. My Singer must be the only one left. I hemmed all your nappies on that Singer when you were no bigger than a kitten. But now you've become a lion, a real lion. But how could you have cried in the street, Usama, in front of everyone? Whatever will people say about the son of Haj Sabir al-Karmi? Karmi men don't cry. Did Adil cry as well?'

'No, he didn't. But he was upset; it showed all over his face.'

'He bears everyone's burdens, Adil does. Yes, he carries the troubles of all. He's got nine people hanging around his neck, not to mention the kidney machine. Poor Adil. He's on the go from sun-up to sundown. Your uncle goes from bad to worse, but he doesn't complain. It's true, he shouts more these days and gets angry. God help Um Adil.* The poor man's kidneys just gave out from worry. The occupation's to blame. After the occupation, Abu Adil couldn't hold his head up the way he used to. But he's still fighting; he meets foreign journalists, he talks to them. He attacks the occupation all right.'

'And Adil?'

'Adil's as silent as the sphinx, son, working away day and night. He's got nine people to support, apart from the machine. Nuwar's the family's pride and joy. She's so tall, with such lovely, naturally straight hair. And her skin's as clear as milk. Though I still say she's too thin. It wears her out — the housework, her studies and her father's illness. She can't weigh more than a hundred pounds at most. She takes vitamins, but it doesn't seem to do any good. I keep telling her — and I know what I'm talking about — that one day she'll get married, and having children will make her plump as a duck. But when I say that, she turns up her

* Um Adil: 'mother of Adil'. Married women are frequently known by the name of their first-born son, according to this formula.

nose and leaves the room. Girls today don't seem eager for marriage like we were in our day. But when she sees you, my son, everything will change. She's radiant, I tell you, like a chandelier. So tall and slim. And you're ready for marriage now. What do you think?'

'Be patient, Mother, I'm still too young.'

'Young! When your father was your age, he already had five kids. I'll always mourn the ones who died, but those that survived I count as blessings. And you're a blessing too, Usama. God give you many children too, my son.'

'But what about the country, Mother?'

'The country's just fine, son. God will provide. The occupation will end.'

'Who will provide?'

'I told you, God will settle everything. Don't you believe in the power of Almighty God?'

Usama changed the subject: 'I can't get married, Mother. I haven't got a job. And I want to save the little money I have for a rainy day.'

'Just use it to get married, and God will take care of everything.'

'You expect God to solve it all, Mother? Isn't there any other way?'

'Don't blaspheme, Usama, God bless you. Don't you believe in the power of Almighty God?'

'But the country, Mother . . .'

'I told you, everything's fine. And soon God will settle everything. Maybe the foreign journalists who visit your uncle will have some influence on America, and America will tell Israel to withdraw and she will. You see, things are not as hard as you think. Didn't I say God will settle everything soon?'

'Mother! Oh, Mother!'

'Yes, apple of your mother's eye?'

'I'm hungry.'

In the evening they left the small house on Saada Street to

visit the family's ancestral home. It was a large house, a real old-style mansion. There were marble pillars, high vaulted ceilings and an open courtyard paved with huge stones. In the middle of the courtyard was a pool, surrounded by lemon trees and sweet-smelling jasmine. Arabesque plasterwork decorated the walls, stained glass lanterns reflected the light and the antique chests in every room were inlaid with mother-of-pearl. But there was a sense that time had sapped the strength of everything in the house, including the kidneys of the head of the family. There were no servants or family retainers left, they had all gone with the other workers to run the factories of Israel. These days a worker's income rivalled that of the head of the household.

Usama was smothered with kisses and greeted with cries of welcome and was then ushered into the large room where his revered uncle was holding court, surrounded by friends, foreign journalists and French television cameramen. A man from the upper echelons of Palestinian society was saying, 'Employment inside Israel is something that's actually been imposed on our workers. We are not to blame and neither is our social structure. It's the occupation.'

All those present in the great room agreed. The French journalists smiled and sipped their cups of coffee spiced with cardamom.

Slim as a reed, she passed in front of him. She was dressed simply, in trousers and a blouse. Her long, fine hair hung loose about her face; her complexion was clear, milk-white.

'Nuwar!'

At the door of the house she turned, saw him and smiled. 'Usama! Thank God for your safe return! When did you get here?'

'Only today.'

They smiled, each appraising the other.

'Goodness, how you've grown, Nuwar! You were just a little girl when I left. Now you're a grown woman – and

reading great big books, I see!'

He reached out for the books and she handed them to him. Apologetically she explained, 'I didn't know you'd come back. I was at al-Najah, at the teacher-training college. I graduate at the end of this year. Then I'll get a job and help Adil support the family. What about you?'

'Same as you. I'll be busy bearing the burdens of the family and the world. Everything's so chaotic here.'

'Totally chaotic,' she agreed, frowning.

'God will settle everything,' he commented sarcastically.

'We'll settle it all ourselves,' she replied evenly.

Usama studied her carefully. 'But life's certainly difficult, don't you agree? Sometimes a person's compelled to bow down, to accept defeat.'

'The strong never bow down,' she replied, looking straight up at him and taking her books back.

'Are you strong, then?' he asked.

'I try to be,' she smiled. 'And you?'

'I try to be, too.'

Pointing to a corner where some leather armchairs were arranged side by side, she suggested, 'Why don't we sit down?'

Glancing towards the reception-room he asked, 'What will my uncle think?'

'My father spends every day like that. Seeing journalists: that's all he likes doing. He enjoys it.'

'Enjoys it?'

'What else? Journalists won't solve the problem, but that doesn't stop him. It makes him feel he's achieving something. His role is to talk. It's all just words.'

'Is that why Adil doesn't sit in on these meetings?'

'Adil,' she commented sadly, 'is excluded from them. Adil . . .' She sighed, then went on: 'Don't ask me about Adil. His situation upsets me very deeply.'

She looked away towards the arched stained-glass windows. Then she regained her self-control. 'How about some coffee?'

'I wouldn't mind, though I've already had some with my

uncle. I wonder where my mother's got to.'

'She's probably upstairs with my mother and our grandmother. Shall we join them?'

'What about the coffee?'

'We'll drink it up there.'

They went upstairs in silence.

'The house is always dirty,' Nuwar said sadly. 'See?'

She ran her hand lightly along the balustrade and showed him the dust on her finger.

'And to think,' she said, 'that people are still proud of owning big houses like this. It's an outdated way of life, it doesn't work any more. This house needs at least three servants, but it doesn't even have one – except me!'

Usama nodded. 'Yes, the time when everyone had servants is over,' he said. 'Does that bother you?'

'No, it's natural. It's up to us to learn how to look after ourselves. But this house is a disaster. No one seems to feel it except me, though.'

'How about Adil? Doesn't he help you?'

'Adil! He leaves every day before dawn and is never back before nightfall.'

'What does he do?'

'He works on the farm, of course. Though I don't know how he manages. He used to complain about the shortage of workers. But he hasn't complained about that for a couple of months, so I don't know what he's done about the farm. I ask, but he doesn't answer. Father asks too, but he evades the question. He's got thinner and paler recently. But he doesn't complain. He's become as silent as the grave.'

She turned, stopped on the top step and pleaded: 'Usama, I don't know how to say this, but you're the person closest to Adil, at least in age. Could you find out what's the matter with him? I need to know.'

Her voice shook and her thin face flushed. He put out his hand and gave her a fraternal pat on the shoulder.

'I'll try, Nuwar,' he said.

Usama stretched out in his warm bed; when he opened his eyes the moon was still up, a fine full moon. He could hear the cadence of his mother's morning prayers rising and falling. He lay there feigning sleep until she ended her prayers with a greeting to the angels she believed were all around her. 'Peace and the mercy of God be with you,' she said.

Oh Mother, he thought, you're an angel and I'm a lion. But who'll look after you when I die? There's no escaping death. And perhaps there'll be prison, torture, mad dogs. But no matter; there's no alternative. We're dedicated to a cause. When it happens you'll say your son died a martyr. And that he was a true 'lion'.

She turned on the light, her head still covered with her white prayer shawl.

'May God accept your prayers, Mother,' he said.

'Good morning, Usama, I pray God will give you a long and happy life and a lovely bride. Would you like some coffee?'

She brought the coffee and sat on the edge of his bed. Crossing her legs, she started on her usual round of innocent gossip, with tales of all that had happened over the past two years. She told him about her departure from Tulkarm, how she'd said goodbye to her friends in the neighbourhood where she'd lived for over a quarter of a century. There were details too of how Adil had stood by

her as though he were her own son. It was Adil who'd rented this house for her, who'd arranged for a truck from Nablus to move her belongings. It was Adil, too, who'd undertaken all the necessary formalities for Usama's return, and who'd asked Haj Abdullah the grocer to look after her.

The grocer often asked after Usama, she said, and wanted to get to know him. 'You should pay him a visit, son. Get acquainted: Haj Abdullah's a respectable man.' He was a person of good taste and great kindness, she went on, even though some people criticized him because he sold cigarettes and cola to the Israeli security forces. What was the poor man to do? How could he refuse to sell to them?

She got onto the subject of work, and then came out with an unexpected suggestion. Why not work on his uncle's farm? The farm needed help, and Adil was like his own brother. And work on a farm wasn't that hard.

'Your father was a farmer all his life,' she reminded him. 'He turned that rocky land into a real paradise. He would dig out those rocks and split them, and level the earth. You'll find it tiring at first, but you'll soon get used to it. And there'll be no one to boss you around. Adil's just like your brother. And eventually Nuwar will inherit her share in the farm and you'll become part owner.'

Usama laughed. 'Mother,' he said, 'you arrange marriages and deaths and plan other people's lives. But when real crises come, you say it's God who'll solve it all!'

'Well, our lives are in God's hands, son, but you know what men are like. And you'll never find anyone prettier or nicer than your cousin Nuwar. Adil's like a brother to you. And it would be better to work on the farm than for strangers. Today there are absolutely no government jobs. And none in UNRWA* either.'

* UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which is supposed to aid Palestinians materially.

Usama tried to avoid committing himself. He told her about the burned vineyards in the Jordan Valley and suggested that his uncle's farm might face a similar threat. His mother answered with prayers to ward off evil and voiced the hope that Israel would cease to exist. Then she went on telling him of her dreams for him.

What could he say to her? Should he tell her that he wasn't going to take a job, no matter what she said or dreamed? How could he tell her that his mission required him to be constantly on the move between villages and towns, and that her naive plans for him could never be fulfilled? Should he try to explain that he refused to work on the farm not because he was afraid of soiling those hands of his that had never wielded a pickaxe? Nor because he'd prefer a job more suitable to his class. The fact was that he'd accepted his role as a committed fighter, and his destiny was no longer a matter of personal choice or whim.

He studied his mother's face, shining with happiness at her dreams, and recalled some verses he'd composed during his first year away, when poetry had been his sole means of expression. That was before all passion, all poetry and all personal dreams had died for him. Yes, they'd died, and the figures in the equation had been set, and he'd become a link in the chain of the cause. He repeated those verses to himself as he listened to his mother day-dreaming about the future.

> Mother doesn't read or write.
> Just her thumb print must suffice.

Yes, he thought, my mother signs with her thumb.

'Usama, please go to the farm, just go and have a look.'

'I will, Mother,' he promised.

The road to the farm looked as though it hadn't been used recently. Grass grew wild over the paths. The little building once used as a reception room was locked up. He found his eyes misting over with tears as he called out, 'Is there anybody here?'

There was no reply. He stood in front of the locked cowshed and poked his head through a small broken window. 'Isn't anyone here?'

No one replied. But he heard barking, and soon the old dog was there, rubbing against his legs.

'You still remember me then, Masoud?'

The dog sat looking up at him in a friendly way. Then suddenly it jumped up and ran off towards an elderly figure now approaching.

'What do you want, young man?' the old peasant shouted, shielding his eyes from the sun.

He came forward painfully, his bowed legs dragging along in his heavy boots, his pace slowed by the folds of his threadbare black overcoat.

'Abu Shahada? Don't you recognize me? It's Usama, Abu Shahada. Don't you know who I am?'

The old man spoke with difficulty, his toothless mouth chewing out the syllables: 'Uthama? Uthama who?' he lisped.

Usama held out his hand, the old man didn't respond to the greeting. His poor eyesight seemed to prevent him

from seeing the outstretched hand. Patting the man's shrunken shoulders weighed down by his coat, Usama asked, 'Won't you shake hands and say hello?'

The old man finally proffered a withered, veined hand and shook hands in silence.

'Abu Shahada, have you really forgotten me?' Usama spoke reproachfully. 'I'm the son of Haj Sabir and Khadija, Adil's aunt. Don't you remember me?' Then he added quickly, looking around him, 'And speaking of Adil, where is he?'

The old man also looked around: 'How would I know?' he said off-handedly.

Usama's confusion and apprehension increased. 'You don't know where Adil is?' he insisted.

'No,' replied the old peasant curtly, his feeble eyes now fixed on the young man.

What had happened to the world? Why had people changed so much? What had time done? And the occupation! This deserted farm, its owner missing and the old man so unfriendly! Usama came closer.

'Even Masoud remembers me; how could you forget me, Abu Shahada?' he asked sadly. 'You carried me on your back so often when I was a little boy. Many's the time Adil and your son Shahada and I played together behind that shed, under the fig tree. And all those times you chased us with your stick when we pointed the hose into the cowshed! Have you really forgotten me, Abu Shahada?'

The old man shook his fist in the air. Then he sat down on the fence that surrounded the flower bed.

'Don't be angry with me,' he said. 'I don't remember anything any more. My wife says I'm good for nothing. The old witch, she's forgotten what I was like in my youth, how I could carry a calf on my back and a sack of oranges in each hand! Oh well. That's life, I suppose. God help us all in our old age.'

Usama sat down on the opposite side of the fence. 'You simply don't remember me,' he sighed. 'But Masoud does,

isn't that right, Masoud?'

The dog was watching him closely, his eyes shining and his tail thumping on the ground. After a long silence, the old man seemed to rouse himself from a deep slumber.

'Welcome!' he shouted. 'And where's Adil these days?'

'I'm the one who's asking about Adil,' Usama objected, surprised.

'Well, I haven't seen him for a couple of weeks or more.'

'And where are the farmhands? What about them?' Usama demanded.

'They all go off to work in Israel.'

'Your son Shahada too?'

'Yes.'

The old man rolled and lit a cigarette. His cheeks collapsed as he inhaled each breath.

'But why doesn't Shahada work here on the farm?' Usama asked.

'Well, it's better over there,' the old man replied nonchalantly.

'Better over there? In what way is it better over there, old man?'

'Lots of money,' the old man replied. 'And none of that "come here, you son of a bitch" or "get lost, you bastard". Yeah, better over there. Lots of money. Plenty of easy work.'

'What?' Usama asked, amazed.

'Better over there,' the old man repeated. 'Nobody stands over you, making you work like a donkey from morning till night.'

Usama took a deep breath. 'But what about this orchard? Who looks after it now?'

The old man shook his head slowly. He flicked a mosquito from his face and spoke with affectation: 'How would I know?'

'Well, who knows then if you don't?' replied Usama. 'You cared for every tree in this orchard as if it was your own son Shahada, and you say you don't know?'

The old man didn't answer. He appeared to be falling asleep.

'Wake up, old man!' cried Usama. 'I said, who looks after this land now?'

The old man looked up at Usama, squinting as if to see him more clearly. 'Is this land ours?' he asked coldly.

'Well, whose is it if not ours?'

'How would I know?' the old man replied, waving his hand back and forth in front of his face.

Usama jumped up and began to pace the path nervously.

What should I say? he asked himself. What should I do? How can I get through to someone like Abu Shahada, so poor, so ignorant, so worn out by time! He stopped pacing and addressed the old man again.

'Who does this land belong to, sir? Whose is it, Haj? Tell me, old man!'

'To the landlord, Effendi, who do you think?' The old man broke out in sudden anger. 'Why are you so angry with me? I'm just a hired hand. I've been here all my life. I don't own any land. I don't own anything. My son Shahada was a hired hand too. And he still is. The land isn't mine or Shahada's, so why should we care about it? Why should we die for it? Don't give me that! Nobody ever came and asked about us when we were nearly dying of starvation. But now, now you come! Why?'

Usama stood there in disbelief at the old man's sudden outburst.

'So you've opened your mouth at last! And you know perfectly well how to think and argue. But you keep pretending you've forgotten who I am. Me, Usama.'

Usama found himself seizing the old man by the collar and shaking him violently. The emaciated old body trembled in his hands like a sack of bran. He stopped himself and eased the old man down to the ground, where he squatted, his head bent.

'Abu Shahada,' he pleaded, 'you haven't forgotten who I am, have you? Say you haven't forgotten who I am.'

The old man didn't raise his head or answer the plea. He felt his chest carefully with his dry old hands and proceeded to rearrange his headscarf which had come loose.

'You haven't forgotten me, Abu Shahada?' said Usama in a low voice.

But the old man didn't reply.

Usama's eyes filled with tears. 'Oh, what's happened to us?' he cried. 'What's happened? I don't understand. I don't understand anything.'

He turned on his heel and tramped out of the orchard. No one saw him off except the aging dog.